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## Gothic Oedipus: subjectivity and Capitalism in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*

By Mark Fisher

1

Batman has contributed more than its fair share to the 'darkness that hangs over contemporary culture like a picturesque pall. 'Dark' designates both a highly marketable aesthetic style and an ethical, or rather anti-ethical, stance, a kind of designer nihilism whose chief theoretical proposition is the denial of the possibility of the Good. Gotham, particularly as re-invented by Frank Miller in the eighties, is, along with Gibson's *Sprawl* and Ridley Scott's *LA*, one of the chief geomythic sources of this trend.<sup>[1]</sup>

2

Miller's legacy for comics has been ambivalent at best. Reflect on the fact that his rise coincides with the almost total failure of superhero comics to produce any new characters with mythic resonance.<sup>[2]</sup> The 'maturity' for which Miller has been celebrated corresponds with comics' depressive and introspective adolescence, and for him, as for all adolescents, the worst sin is exuberance. Hence his trademark style is deflationary, taciturn: consider all those portentous pages stripped of dialogue in which barely anything happens and contrast them with the crazed effervescence of the typical Marvel page in the 60s. Miller's pages have all the brooding silence of a moody fifteen-year old boy. We are left in no doubt: the silence *signifies*.

3

Miller traded on a disingenuous male adolescent desire to both have comics and to feel superior to them. But his demythologization, inevitably, produced only a new mythology, one that posed as more sophisticated than the one it has displaced but is in fact an utterly predictable world of 'moral ambivalence' in which 'there are only shades of grey'. There are reasons for being highly sceptical about Miller's bringing into comics a noir-lite cartoon nihilist bleakness that has long been a cliché in films and books. The 'darkness' of this vision is in fact curiously reassuring and comforting, and not only because of the sentimentality it can never extirpate. (Miller's 'hard-bitten' world reminds me not so much of noir, but of the simulation of noir in Dennis Potter's *Singing Detective*, the daydream-fantasies of a cheap hack, thick with misogyny and misanthropy and cooked in intense self-loathing.)

4

It is hardly surprising that Miller's model of realism came to the fore in comics at the time when Reaganomics and Thatcherism were presenting themselves as the only solutions to America and Britain's ills. Reagan and Thatcher claimed to have 'delivered us from the "fatal abstractions" inspired by the "ideologies of the past"' (Badiou, 2005, 7). They had awoken us from the supposedly flawed, dangerously deluded dreams of collectivity and re-acquainted us with the 'essential truth' that individual human beings can only be motivated by their own animal interests.

5

These propositions belong to an implicit ideological framework we can call *Capitalist Realism*. On the basis of a series of assumptions—human beings are irredeemably self-interested, (social) Justice can never be achieved—Capitalist Realism projects a vision of what is 'Possible'.

6

For Alain Badiou, the rise to dominance of this restricted sense of possibility must be regarded as a period of 'Restoration'. As Badiou explained in an interview with Cabinet magazine, 'in France, "Restoration" refers to the period of the return of the King, in 1815, after the Revolution and Napoleon. We are in such a period. Today we see liberal capitalism and its political system, parliamentarianism, as the only natural and acceptable solutions' (Badiou, Cox, Whalen, 2001/02). According to Badiou, the ideological defence for these political configurations takes the form of a lowering of expectations.

'We live in a contradiction: a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian—where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone—is presented to us as ideal. To justify their conservatism, the partisans of the established order cannot really call it ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible. Sure, they say, we may not live in a condition of perfect Goodness. But we're lucky that we don't live in a condition of Evil. Our democracy is not perfect. But it's better than the bloody dictatorships. Capitalism is unjust. But it's not criminal like Stalinism. We let millions of Africans die of AIDS, but we don't make racist nationalist declarations like Milosevic. We kill Iraqis with our airplanes, but we don't cut their throats with machetes like they do in Rwanda, etc.' (*ibid*)

Capitalism and liberal democracy are 'ideal' precisely in the sense that they are 'the best that one can expect', that is to say, *the least worst*.<sup>[3]</sup> This chimes with Miller's rendition of the hero in *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Year One*: Batman may be authoritarian, violent and sadistic, but in a world of endemic corruption, he is the least worst option. (Indeed, such traits may turn out to be necessary in conditions of ubiquitous venality.) Just as Badiou suggests, in Miller's Gotham it is no longer possible to assume the existence of Good. Good has no *positive* presence—what Good there has to be defined by reference to a self-evident Evil which it is not. Good, that is to say, is the *absence* of an Evil whose existence is self-evident.

7

The fascination of the latest cinema version of Batman, *Batman Begins* (directed by Christopher Nolan) consists in its mitigated return to the question of Good. The film still belongs to the .Restoration. to the degree that it is unable to imagine a possible beyond capitalism: as we shall see, it is a specific mode of capitalism—post-Fordist finance capital—that is demonised in *Batman Begins*, not capitalism *per se*. Yet the film leaves open the possibility of agency which Capitalist Realism forecloses.

8

Nolan's revisiting of Batman is not a re-invention but a reclaiming of the myth, a grand syncretism that draws upon the whole history of the character.<sup>[4]</sup> Gratifyingly, then, *Batman Begins* is not about 'shades of grey' at all, but rather about competing versions of the Good. In *Batman Begins*, Christian Bale's Bruce Wayne is haunted by a superfluity of Fathers (and a near absence of mothers: his mother barely says a word), each with their own account of the Good. First, there is his biological father, Thomas Wayne, a rose-tinted, soft focus moral paragon, the very personification of philanthropic Capital, the 'man who built Gotham'. In keeping with the Batman myth established in the 30's *Detective Comics*, Wayne Pere is killed in a random street robbery, surviving only as a moral wraith tormenting the conscience of his orphaned son. Second, there is R'as Al Ghul, who in Nolan's film is Wayne's hyperstitional<sup>[5]</sup> mentor-guru, a Terroristic figure who represents a ruthless ethical code completely opposed to the benevolent paternalism of Thomas Wayne. Bruce is assisted in the struggle (fought out in his own psyche) between these two Father figures by a third, Michael Caine's Alfred, the 'maternal' carer who offers the young Bruce unconditional love.

9

The struggle between Fathers is doubled by the conflict between Fear and Justice that has been integral to the Batman mythos since it first appeared in 1939. The challenge for Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins* is not only to best Fear, as wielded by the Miller-invented crime boss Falcone and the Scarecrow with his 'weaponized hallucinogens', but to identify Justice, which, as the young Wayne must learn, cannot be equated with revenge.

10

From the start, the Batman mythos has been about the pressing of Gothic Fear into the service of heroic Justice. Echoing the origin story as recounted in *Detective Comics* in 1939, which has Bruce famously declare, "Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot, so my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts", Nolan's Wayne dedicates himself to turning fear against those who use it. Yet Nolan's version makes the origin story both more Oedipal *and*

more anti-Oedipal than it appeared in *Detective Comics*. In the original comic, Bruce settles upon the name 'Batman' when a single Bat flies into his room. Nolan's rendering of Batman's primal scene is significantly different, in that it takes place outside the family home, beyond the realm of the Oedipal, in a cave in the capacious grounds of Wayne Manor, and not with a single bat but with a whole (Deleuzian) pack.<sup>[6]</sup> The name 'Batman', with its suggestions of becoming-animal, does indeed have a Deleuzoguattarian resonance. Yet the proximity of Batman's name to that of some of Freud's case histories—'Ratman' especially, but also 'Wolfman'—is no accident either. Batman remains a thoroughly Oedipal figure (as *Batman Begins* leaves us no doubt).<sup>[7]</sup> *Batman Begins* re-binds the becoming-animal with the Oedipal by having Bruce's fear of bats figure as a partial *cause* of his parents' death. Bruce is at the opera when the sight of bat-like figures on stage drives him to nag his parents until they leave the theatre and are killed.

11

The Gothic and the Oedipal elements of the Batman mythos were entwined immediately, on the two pages of *Detective Comics* on which Batman's origin was first told. As Kim Newman identifies, Wayne's epiphanic revelation that 'I must be a terrible creature of the night... I shall become a BAT... a weird figure of the night' contains 'subliminal quotes from *Dracula* ("creatures of the night, what sweet music they make") and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* ("you shall become Caligari") (Newman, 20).<sup>[8]</sup> These panels follow three at the top of the page where the shocked Bruce sees the bodies of his parents ('father, mother ... Dead, they're dead') and 'swears by [their deaths] to avenge [them] by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals'. Batman is self-consciously imagined—and self-created—as a Gothic monster, a 'weird figure of the dark', but one who will use 'the night' against the criminals who habitually hide in it.

12

If Batman was heavily indebted to German Expressionism—via Universal's horror pictures—so, famously, was film noir, which emerged, like Batman, in the late 30s and early 40s. (As we've already seen, Miller's rendition of Batman can be seen as in many ways a postmodern investigation of this parallel.) Remarks made by Alenka Zupancic suggest a possible hidden source for the complicity between Batman and noir: Oedipus again. '[I]n contrast to *Hamlet*,' Zupancic writes, 'the story of Oedipus has often been said to belong to the whodunnit genre. Some have gone even further, and seen in *Oedipus the King* the prototype of the *noir* genre. Thus *Oedipus the King* appeared in the 'noir series' of French publisher Gallimard ('translated from the myth' by Didier Lamaison)' (Zupancic, 245).<sup>[9]</sup> Batman, the superhero-detective, walks in the footsteps of the first detective, Oedipus.

13

Ultimately, however, the problem for Batman is that he remains an Oedipus who not gone through the Oedipus complex. As Zupancic points out, the Oedipus complex turns on the *discrepancy* between the Symbolic and the empirical father: the Symbolic Father is the embodiment of the Symbolic order itself, solemn carrier of Meaning and bearer of the Law; the empirical father is the 'simple, more or less decent man'. For Zupancic, the standard rendering of the 'typical genesis of subjectivity' has it that the child first of all encounters the Symbolic father and then comes to learn that this mighty figure is a 'simple, more or less decent man'. Yet, as Zupancic establishes, this trajectory is the exact inverse of the one which

Oedipus pursues. Oedipus begins by encountering an 'rude old man at the crossroads' and only later does he learn that this 'simple man', this 'vulgar creature', was the Father. Thus 'Oedipus travels the path of initiation (of 'symbolization') in reverse and, in so doing, he encounters the radical contingency of the Meaning borne by the symbolic.' (Zupancic, 193)

14

For Bruce Wayne, though, there is no discrepancy at all between the Symbolic and the empirical. Thomas Wayne's early death means that he is frozen in his young son's psyche as the mighty emissary of the Symbolic; he is never 'desublimated' into a 'simple man', but remains a moral exemplar—indeed he is the representative of Law as such, who must be avenged but who can never be equalled. In *Batman Begins*, it is the intervention of R'as Al Ghul which prompts an Oedipal crisis. The young Wayne is convinced that his father's death is his fault, but Al Ghul tries to convince him that his parents' death is his father's responsibility because the good-natured and liberal Thomas Wayne did not know how to Act; he was a weak-willed failure. Yet Bruce refuses to go through this initiation and retains loyalty to the 'Name of the Father' while Al Ghul remains a figure of excess and Evil.

15

The question Al Ghul poses to Bruce is: are you, with your conscience, your respect for life, too weak-willed, too frightened to do what is Necessary? Can you Act? Wayne is forced to decide: is Al Ghul what he claims to be, the ice cold instrument of impersonal Justice, or its grotesque parody? The ultimate Evil in the film turns out to originate from Ghul's excessive zeal, not from some hoaky diabolism nor from some psycho-biographical happenstance.<sup>[10]</sup>

16

In this respect, it is the film that Zizek wanted *Revenge of the Sith* to be: a film, that is to say, which dares to hypothesise that Evil might result from an excess of Good. For Zizek, 'Anakin [Skywalker] should have become a monster out his very excessive attachment with seeing Evil everywhere and fighting it' but '[i]nstead of focusing on Anakin's hubris as an overwhelming desire to intervene, to do Good, to go to the end for those he loves and thus fall to the Dark Side, Anakin is simply shown as an indecisive warrior who is gradually sliding into Evil by giving way to the temptation of Power, by falling under the spell of the evil Emperor.' (Zizek, 2005)

17

In parallel with Zizek's reading of *Revenge of the Sith*, *Batman Begins*' treatment of the question of the Father—who *is* the father?—is doubled by the looming (omni-)presence of finance capital, and the issue of what is to be done about it. In Batman's universe of course, 'the Name of the Father'—Wayne—is also the name of a capitalist enterprise. The takeover of Wayne Industries by shareholder capital means that Thomas's name has been stolen. Consequently, Bruce Wayne's struggle against finance capital is also, inevitably, an attempt to restore the besmirched Name of the Father. Since Wayne Industries is at the heart—literally and figuratively—of the city, post-Fordist Gotham finds itself as blighted as the Sphinx-cursed Thebes. Its infrastructure rotten, its civil society disintegrated, Gotham is in the grip of a Depression and a crime wave, both of which are attributed to the newly predatory, delocalised Capital that now has control of the Wayne corporation. The impact of

finance capital is given a more personal narrative focus through the character of the kindly Lucius Fox (another candidate for Father surrogate)<sup>[11]</sup> who is degraded by the new regime. The implication is that this state of rottenness can only be rectified once the name of the Father resumes its rights.

18

It is in its treatment of capitalism that *Batman Begins* is at its most intriguingly contradictory. In part, this can be attributed to the effects of attempting to retrofit the 1930s core narrative engine into a twenty-first century vehicle: the reference to the Depression is a clear Thirties echo, setting up a disjunction with a contemporary USA that has enjoyed an unprecedented period of economic success. In keeping with capitalism itself, Deleuze-Guattari's 'motley painting of everything that ever was', Nolan's Gotham is an admixture of the medieval and the ultra-contemporary, of the American, the European and the Third World. It resembles at once the crooked steeples and spires of German expressionism and the *favela*-sprawls of cyberpunk:<sup>[12]</sup> the nightmare of Old Europe erupting in the heart of the American Megalopolis.

19

In a fascinating reading of *Batman Begins*, China Miéville argues that the film's anti-capitalism cashes out as an advocacy of fascism. The film, he writes,

is about fascism's self-realisation, and the only struggle it undergoes is to admit its own necessity. BB argues for the era of the absolute(ist) corporation against the 'postmodern' social dilutions of shareholder capitalism (perceived here in old-school corporate paranoia as a kind of woolly weakness), let alone against the foolishness of those well-meaning liberal rich who don't understand that their desire to travel with the poor and working class are the \*causes\* of social conflict, because The Rich Man At His Garden The Poor Man At His Gate, and that the blurring of those boundaries confuses the bestial instincts of the sheep-masses. The film argues quite explicitly (in what's obviously, in its raised-train setting, structured as a debate with Spiderman 2, a stupid but good-hearted film that thinks people are basically decent) that masses are dangerous unless terrorised into submission (Spidey falls among the masses - they nurture him and make sure he's ok. Bats falls among them - they are a murderous and bestial mob because they are not being \*effectively scared enough\*). The final way of \*solving\* social catastrophe is ... by the demolition of the mass transit system that ruined everything by literally raised the poor and put them among the rich: travelling together, social-democratic welfarism as opposed to trickle-downism is a nice dream but leads to social collapse, and if left unchecked terrorism that sends transit systems careering through the sky into tall buildings in the middle of New York-style cities—9/11 as caused by the crisis of \*excessive social solidarity\*, the arrogance of masses \*not being sufficiently terrified of their shepherds\*.<sup>[13]</sup>

In all a film that says social stratification is necessary to prevent tragedy, and that it should be policed by terrorising the plebeians, for the sake of corporations which if there is a happy ending ... will end up back in the hands of a single enlightened despot, hurrah, to save us from the depredations of consensus.

There is no doubt that the film poses finance capital as a problem that will be solved by the return of a re-personalised capital, with 'the enlightened despot' Bruce taking on the role of

the dead Thomas. It is equally clear, as we've already seen, that *Batman Begins* is unable to envisage an alternative to capitalism itself, favouring instead a nostalgic rewind to prior forms of capitalism. (One of the structuring fantasies of the film is the notion that crime and social disintegration are exclusively the results of capitalist failure, rather than the inevitable accompaniments to capitalist 'success'.)

20

However, we must distinguish between corporate capitalism and fascism if only because the film makes such a point of doing so. The fascistic option is represented not by Wayne-Batman but by R'as al Ghul. It is al Ghul who plots the total razing of a Gotham he characterizes as irredeemably corrupt. Wayne's language is not that of renewal-through-destruction (and here Schumpeterian capitalism and fascism, in most other respects entirely opposed, find themselves in sympathy) but of philanthropic meliorism. (It should also be noted that the masses who, in a pointed reference to Romero's *Living Dead* films, threaten to consume and destroy Batman are under the influence of the Scarecrow's 'weaponized hallucinogens' when they attempt to dismember him, although this image of the masses no doubt tell us more about the political unconscious of the film-makers than it does about that of the masses.)

21

If the film's handling of capitalism is incoherent, in what does its challenge to Capitalist Realism consist? It is to be found not at the level of politics but in its account of ethics, agency and subjectivity. Žižek's classic account of ideology in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* turns on the difference between belief and action. At the level of belief, key capitalist ideas—commodities are animate; capital has a quasi-natural status—are repudiated but it is precisely the ironic distance from such notions that allows us to *act* as if they are true. The disavowal of the beliefs allows us to perform the actions. Ideology, then, depends upon the conviction that what 'really matters' is what we are, rather than what we do, and that 'what we are' is defined by an 'inner essence'. In terms of contemporary American culture, this plays out in the 'therapeutic' idea that we can remain a 'good person' regardless of what we do.

22

The film's principal ethical lesson presents a reversal of this ideological conviction. In Wayne's struggle to differentiate justice from revenge, revenge is personified by the uncompromising R'as al Ghul, while justice is represented by the assistant District Attorney, Rachel Dawes. Dawes is given the film's crucial (anti-therapeutic) slogan, 'It's not who you are inside that counts, it's what you *do* that makes you what you are.' The Good is possible, but not without Decision and the Act. In reinforcing this message, *Batman Begins* restores to the hero an existentialist drama that puts to flight not only Capitalist Realist nihilism, but also the niggling, knowing sprites of postmodern reflexivity<sup>[14]</sup> that have sucked his blood for way too long.

## Notes

[1] For a summary of the ethical assumptions of this world, look no further than K W Jeter's *Noir* (a novel that is heavily indebted to both Gibson and *Blade Runner*). Jeter has his hardboiled novelist, Turbiner, define the essence of noir as follows: '*The looks, the darkness, the shadows, all those trite rain-slick streets—that was the least of it. That had nothing to do with it. ... It's betrayal ... That's what it's always been. That's what makes it so realistic, even when it is at its most dreamlike and shabby, when it feels like it's happening on another planet. The one we lost and can't remember, but we can see it when we close our eyes...*' (192) For an (unfavourable) comparison of Miller's *Sin City* with 40s noir, see Patterson, 2005.

[2] Alan Moore is an interesting parallel case to Miller. Moore, too, made his name with comics that put superheroes in a more 'realistic' context. He seemed similarly ambivalent about the superhero genre, drawn to work within it but also driven by a desire to reform and to some extent demythologize it. However, Moore's more recent work—on *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Promethea*—has explicitly dealt with the concept of mythologization (although, naturally, this is quite different from actually producing a character that attains a mythological status). Moore also retains a place for a kind of egalitarian critique of State power which is lacking in Miller: see for instance his depiction of aristocratic corruption and conspiracy in *From Hell*.

[3] Otherwise, Badiou would be contradicting himself, claiming on the one hand that capitalism is 'ideal' and that it destroys any reference to the ideal.

[4] As Newman's piece establishes, with a detailed scholarly survey of the origin of the film's characters and set pieces.

[5] For an explanation of the concept of hyperstition, see <http://hypersti...tractdynamics.org>, especially 'How Do Fictions Become Hyperstitions' (<http://hypersti...chives/003345.html>).

[6] This modification is in fact prompted by Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*.

[7] It is significant that perhaps the three greatest American superheroes—Batman, Superman, and Spiderman—are orphans, but the Oedipal torment is most intense in Batman (It is displaced in Spiderman onto his Aunt, the mother-substitute for and to whom he is eternally responsible, and Uncle, for whose death he feels guilty.)

[8] To these two references, one must add Wayne Manor itself, whose rambling quasi-aristocratic splendour echoes Castles Dracula and Frankenstein (this latter link reinforced by a panel in which Bruce 'prepares himself for his future career. by becoming a .master scientist.) from the Universal films of the 30s. But such structures have deeper roots in American Horror: one cannot but think of the melancholy grandeur of Poe's House of Usher.

[9] She goes on to say, 'That which brings the story of Oedipus close to the noir universe is, of course, the fact that the hero—the detective—is without knowing it, implicated in the crimes he is investigating. One could even say that the story of Oedipus lies at the heart of the 'new wave' of *film noir*—films such as *Angel Heart* and *Blade Runner* (the director's cut), where it emerges at the end that the hero is himself the criminal he is looking for.' (245-6)

[10] In this respect, as in so many others, it compares favourably with Tim Burton's *Batman*. Burton pioneered a kind of psycho-biographically-inclined 'Dark-Lite', and his account of the Joker's origin—man falls into bath of acid and goes psychotic—traded in the cheapest and shallowest psychobiographical cliché.

[11] He was also, according to Newman, 'perhaps the first upper middle-class black character in comics.' (Newman, 21)

[12] Which suggests, perhaps, a looping of cyberpunk (to which Batman in many ways now belongs) back to (one of) its origins in German Expressionism.

[13] Newman also spotted a 9/11 parallel: '*Batman Begins* finally feeds back into the the world of 2005, even as it picks up threads from 1939 and 1986. Fear (*phobos*), the limited realm of the bat-phobic Bruce and phobia-expert Crane, has been subsumed by terror



(*deimos*). This America is riven by injustice . and is haunted by a fanatic eastern sect with a charismatic but impossible-to-catch figurehead bent on crashing a mode of transport into a skyscraper to trigger an explosion of panic that will destroy society.' (Newman, 21)

[14] For an analysis of which, see Fisher and Mackay, 1996.

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